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The Clipper Visits...

Rick Jakaus

By CORINNE WOODWORTH



Rick Jakaus aboard *Shadowfax*.

He doesn't have the kind of job that you'd find advertised in the *Boston Sunday Globe*. He doesn't have the kind of job that you'd prepare for by spending years in a classroom. He does have the kind of job that many recreational boaters in Duxbury dream about. Rick Jakaus is paid to sail.

As skipper of *Shadowfax*, a custom-built Swan 59, Jakaus travels the world. The boat was berthed in Weymouth for part of the 1996 summer, while the Jakaus family enjoyed the coastal charm of Duxbury.

Jakaus began his sailing career as a racer, first in Olympic competition as crew on a 470, then locally on PHRF boats. But, he reflects, "I always wanted to do the Whitbread. I used to get sail magazines and look at the Whitbread photos. The America's Cup wasn't my idea of what sailing was about. That's sissy stuff. It's the boys who want to be back in the bar by 5 every day."

The Whitbread is a round-the-world race organized by

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a group of British racing enthusiasts in collaboration with the Royal Naval Sailing Assn and sponsored by the Whitbread Brewery. The 32,000-mile route runs along 6 separate legs, roughly following old clipper ship routes. It takes 9 months to complete and was first undertaken in 1973 by 14 privately funded yachts from 6 countries.

His opportunity came in 1989 with the Finnish boat *Martela*. Jakaus chose a berth on *Martela* over 2 other boats because of the skipper, Markku Wiikeri. "He was like John Wayne, had the right attitude, the best boat, and he paid a lot more than the others." The most important quality of a prospective crew member, according to Jakaus, is compatibility. "If you end up fighting, it doesn't matter how good you are. If you have an ego problem, it drags the whole team down. You have to have fun as well as win races."

Despite 8 months of careful preparations, however, *Martela* and her crew would not finish the 1989 Whitbread. "At the beginning of the race, after the first leg, the keel had come loose -- not fallen off, but come loose. We ended up bringing down the designer and the builder and fixed it. We did the southern ocean and it all held up.

"Around Cape Horn we were coming back up the Atlantic and it started to come loose and pendulum a bit. We tried sailing light, taking a load off it, keeping a load off the keel, but it banged back and forth a lot more, so we put the pressure on, put up more sails and really got the boat going. The pressure at least held the keel to one side and pinned it in place. We were only about 3 days out of Uruguay, Punta del Este, so we kept running and we made arrangements to call the race committee once an hour and tell them our position and our progress, so that if something did happen, they would know where we were."

Equipment failure was not unknown in the Whitbread, with punishing distances over unforgiving seas. Lives had been lost, too, during the history of the race. When a crew member goes overboard, it can take as

long as 12 minutes to turn around a racer sailing at 20 knots. Strong winds and high seas complicate a rescue, and hypothermia can claim a life in less than 8 minutes. With the nearest competitor hours away, it was crucial that the race committee know exactly where *Martela* was located in the event of a disaster.

"At 6 o'clock in the morning (Feb. 26, 1990) the co-captain was down below calling up to the race committee, saying 'This is *Martela*. It's 6 in the morning, our position is so and so north -- Oh #%&, the keel fell off!' So we got out our latitude but not our longitude.

"Within 5 seconds we were on our side with the mainsail in the water. It took another 10 seconds to get the boat completely upside down." Miraculously, nobody was hurt, and Jakaus points out that "Only 4 persons got wet. We were all dinghy sailors. The boys were used to Lasers and Optimists, and when the boat rolls you run over the top of the boat. We all just scrambled over the side and sat on the bottom while it sat upside down."

"It took about 6 hours to get rescued. We were lucky. There were a couple of boats in the fleet who were trying to catch us and pass us. The boat behind us came and the boat in front of us turned around and came back." There was some initial hope that the keel could be towed back to land and salvaged, but that was not possible. "There were 2 years of preparation and hard work gone down the drain very quickly." Despite the hardship and danger, Jakaus asserts "It won't be my last Whitbread, but it is at this point."

Jakaus returned to Finland where he received a call from the previous owner of *Shadowfax*. He had bought the boat in the West Indies, went down to look at it and found a captain with a drug problem and a first mate with a gun. He fired them. The boat was a bit of a wreck, so we did a bit of work on it and sailed it from St. Lucia to Sweden. We sailed it around Sweden for a year and then it got sold to an American from Alaska. I got sold with the boat." The present owner is Dr. Rodney Cook, an oncologist from Anchorage.

Shadowfax, which was built in Finland in 1985, underwent a structural refit in 1994, and further renovations in 1995. The boat is equipped with state of the art navigational systems, but Jakaus notes that the boat also has a sextant and compass. "If everything else fails, we can use them."

Jakaus' official title is "Captain" although he does not presently have captain's papers. "I lost them. They sank when *Martela* tipped over. I'm actually working to renew them. I never really needed them because I don't do charters or anything commercial. I'm not very good at charters. You have to be really nice to people. You have to be polite to people. You have to say 'Yes ma'am, no ma'am, please don't scratch the deck and ruin the boat like that.'"

The job description includes seeing to details from all points of the compass. As Captain, Jakaus makes travel arrangements to get crew in and out, works with boat

yards to arrange for repairs and personally services "everything, from the top of the mast to the bottom of the keel. It's the same as running a household, but you have the mechanical, electrical and sailing aspects of it. The bottom line is to make sure the boat is in good condition, ready when he (Cook) wants it, where he wants it and make sure he enjoys himself."

Jakaus keeps his part in perspective. "Captaining is a career nowadays for a lot of people. I do it part-time. It's a career that you don't go out drinking every night, not like being a pirate. You're a businessman, wearing a uniform of white shirt and khaki shorts." He does, in fact, run a tight ship. "There's no alcohol on my boat." His main career goal, however remains "to win the Whitbread. I'm still a racer when you get right down to it. I'd probably be a bit more content and comfortable (after I win) than I am right now."

His 3-week on/3-week off schedule allows Jakaus to spend plenty of time with his wife Pia, a former Finnish Olympic team member, and their 2 boys, Sebastian, 5, and Alexander, 3. The family lives in Finland, where Pia is a medical student. Although Jakaus retains American citizenship, he is trying to establish residency in Finland. The government, however, requires him to live in the country for 181 days out of the year, and Jakaus says "I'm never any place for 6 months out of the year."

In his younger days, Jakaus had a rather buoyant lifestyle, which was illustrated by the fact that he claimed to have only 2 professions: a Laser and a motorcycle. While Jakaus' lifestyle is now a little more firmly anchored, he admits that he still has few possessions, "bicycles now, boats and books. We have a Volvo now, too. We'd rather have less and go more places."

There are still harbors where this sailor has not anchored. He would like to go to the South Pacific someday, but the waters of New Zealand remain his favorite. "It's a beautiful country with wonderful people. There are mountains where you can go skiing and they have great sailing." He also ranks the sailors of New Zealand at the top of world competition. "They have the Whitbread, the America's Cup and they hold the around the world record — a little country, but it's the national sport."

Jakaus is a man whose hand is steady on the wheel and whose course is clearly charted. Wherever he catches the wind, you can be sure it will be an interesting ride.